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ABSTRACT

Eating disorders are more common among women than men, perhaps because of the present cultural emphasis on thinness for women. Television is one potential communicator of this thin standard of attractiveness. To assess how men and women are presented on television, 139 male characters and 82 female characters from 33 popular television shows were rated for weight and age. A weight-rating scale was created from photographs of people which were rated by 12 undergraduate students. The photographs which displayed the highest amount of agreement among raters and which fell on equal intervals on a four-point scale were used; four photographs were of men and four were of women. These eight photographs were rated by 51 college students in a validation procedure. Finally, pairs of undergraduate research assistants were assigned to watch the television shows and record the character's name, weight-rating from the devised scale, sex, age-rating, and race. Pearson correlation coefficients obtained to measure inter-rater reliability were all significant at the .01 level or better. The two scores from the pair of raters were averaged into a single rating. Chi-square analyses of weight and age ratings revealed that women on American television were rated as younger and thinner than men. More research is needed to establish the relationship between cultural pressure to be thin, as reflected in the media, and serious eating disorders. (NRB)

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A COMPARISON OF THE WEIGHTS AND AGES OF WOMEN AND MEN ON TELEVISION

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Women, Weight, and Television

A Comparison of the Weights and Ages of Women and Men on Television

Topical Session Preference: Social Influence

Eating disorders are more common among women than men (Van Itallie, 1977; Bemis, 1978). Experts in the field of eating disorders suggest that one of the factors contributing to these disorders is the present cultural empnasis on thinness for women (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz & Thompson, 1980; Garner & Garfinkel, 1980; Chernin, 1980; Wooley & Wooley, 1983). For example, Garner et al. believe that the social pressure on women to be thin may be leading to the prevalence of anorexia nervosa.

Television is one potential communicator of the thin standard of attractiveness, but the effects of television on body image and the eating patterns of women are unknown. In order to assess the effects of television on women, it is important to examine what they are viewing. The cultural empnasis hypothesis would suggest that women actors in popular television programs would be thinner than the typical viewer, thus constituting a subtle social pressure towards slimming. Apparently there is more social pressure for women to be physically attractive than there is for men (Lerner, Karabenick & Stuart, 1973), therefore the social pressure towards slimming should be greater for women than men. In the following study the characters from the most popular television shows were rated for weight. Since young women are traditionally seen as more beautiful than older women, age was also rated. It was predicted that female characters would be younger and thinner than male characters.

Method

Selection of Television Shows and Characters

The television shows selected for this study were obtained from a weekly

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Nielsen National Index dated March 21,1982. This index includes the 40 television shows watched most often for any given week. A total of 7 programs were eliminated, including the news and programs that do not have a regularly appearing cast (e.g. movies and "Real People").

On the remaining 33 programs 221 characters were rated. These characters included 139 men and 82 women. The data from 15 characters below age 18 were eliminated since the raters found it difficult to rate their weight.

Construction of a Weight-Rating Scale

In order to rate the weight of television characters a weight-rating scale was created. Forty photographs of people were obtained from magazines. These photographs were then rated for weight on a scale from one (thin) through ten (fat) by 12 undergraduate research assistants.

Four photographs of men and four of women were used. These photographs displayed the highest amount of agreement among raters and fell on equal intervals on the four-point scale.

Validation of the Weight-Rating Scale

Fifty one students enrolled in an introductory psychology course served as subjects in the validation procedure, which took place after the television characters were rated.

The eight photographs which appeared in the weight-rating scale were randomized. These photographs were then presented together on an illustration board in the front of the classroom. Subjects were requested to rate the weight of the person in each photograph on a scale from one (thin) to nine (fat).

The ratings given to the male and female pictures at each scale value were compared using t-tests. While the t-tests at the lower scale values (1

and 2) were not significant, we did find differences between the male and female pictures used as scale values 3 and 4. In both cases the male scale photographs were rated as fatter. As a result, in order to be rated on the upper end males had to be relatively fatter than females.

Procedure

Five undergraduate research assistants served as raters of the weight and age of the television characters. A pair of raters, working independently, was assigned to each television program. Each rater filled out a questionnaire which asked for the character's name, weight-rating, sex, age-rating, and race. Raters were asked to use the weight-rating scale while rating the weight of the television characters. When a character was fatter than the photograph weight rated as four she or he was rated as five.

The characters in the 33 observed programs were all rated within a three week period.

Results

Inter-rater Reliability

Pearson correlation coefficients were obtained for the weight ratings and age ratings of each of the seven pairs of independent raters. For the weight ratings the range was from .71 to .96, and for the age ratings the range was from .66 to .89. All coefficients were significant at the .01 level or better.

Weight and Age Ratings of Women and Men on Popular Television

The two scores from the pair of raters were averaged into a single rating. The weight-ratings and age-ratings for television characters are presented in Table 1. A highly significant chi-square of 62.76 ($df=4$, $p<.001$) was obtained, demonstrating that the observed proportion of weight ratings was different for males and females. As for age, a chi-square of 16.77 ($df=4$, $p<.01$) was

obtained, indicating that the observed proportion of age ratings was different for males and females. These results show that women are not only thinner than men on popular television, but they are also younger.

Discussion

This study clearly demonstrates that the cultural expectation of women to be thin is reflected on popular television. Female characters on American television are younger and thinner than the male characters. While it is premature to conclude that watching television causes eating disorders, girls do attend (Sprafkin, 1975) to these young and thin adult models and may learn that in order to be successful they must have a lean and angular body. It is not unreasonable to suggest that women struggle to attain the almost impossible goal (Beller, 1980) of the "ideal" feminine form. Women who are obese frequently diet, and those who manage to lose a few pounds often find that they are no more successful or happy than before (Orbach, 1978). These women often gain the weight back. Anorexic women may stop eating altogether in an attempt to attain the "ideal" body which will lead to success, happiness and family approval. It would be useful to know if women who internalize cultural expectations of beauty displayed on television to a greater extent than other women have a higher risk of developing eating disorders. Clearly more research is needed to establish the relationship between cultural pressure to be thin, as reflected in the media, and serious eating disorders.

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Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Cnaracter Appearance

for Eacn Level of Weignt, Age, and Sex

	Weignt Rating				
level	1	2	3	4	5
range	0.0 - 1.5	1.6 - 2.5	2.6 - 3.5	3.6 - 4.5	4.6 - 5.0
Sex					

Male					
frequency	1	23	78	27	8
percent	0.7	16.8	56.9	19.7	5.8
Female					
frequency	10	46	21	2	2
percent	12.3	56.8	25.9	2.5	2.5

	Age Rating				
level	1	2	3	4	5
age range	18 - 25	26 - 35	36 - 50	51 - 65	66 - 100
Sex					

Male					
frequency	21	47	55	11	1
percent	16	35	41	8	1
Female					
frequency	27	34	13	4	0
percent	35	44	17	5	0